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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE NEAR EAST

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Statement by the FAO Director General

Queries on the content of this document may be addressed to:

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His Excellency, the Prime Minister of Iraq
The Chairperson of the Regional Conference for the Near East,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

1. I would like to begin by extending my gratitude to the **Government of Iraq** for hosting this important FAO Governing Body meeting,
2. And to **His Excellency Muhammad Karim Al-Khafaji, Minister for Agriculture of Iraq** and his team for the excellent collaboration.
3. A little less than two years ago, we met virtually for the **35th Session of this Regional Conference**, hosted by the **Sultanate of Oman**.
4. I wish to convey my appreciation to **His Excellency Saud Al Habsi, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources of Oman**, for his commitment and leadership.
5. Over the past two years, the world has been learning to cope with the pressing circumstances brought about by the pandemic.
6. Many sectors, including the agrifood sectors, have been struggling to recover from the shocks created by the pandemic and other challenges,
7. Which has forced us to reconsider our priorities and approaches, and has highlighted the importance of more sustainable and resilient societies.
8. As well as of the urgency to achieve the SDGs to secure food, health, education, a healthy environment, and a decent life for all.
9. It has also underscored the centrality of our agrifood systems for achieving these objectives,
10. **Transforming our agrifood systems to be more efficient, more inclusive, more resilient and more sustainable is more critical than ever before.**
11. The pandemic continues to pose significant challenges to food security and nutrition, especially for rural and vulnerable communities,
12. And in countries and areas affected by conflict, humanitarian emergencies and protracted crises.
13. There is no long-term solution to hunger, poverty and development, without sustainable and enduring peace,
14. For which international solidarity and collaboration are essential.

Dear Colleagues,

15. Since my arrival at FAO, I have been engaged in a series of actions to make FAO more effective, more efficient and fit for purpose.
16. The **FAO Strategic Framework 2022-2031** is fully aligned with the SDGs and the UN Common Agenda,
17. And firmly anchored in the **four betters: better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life for all, leaving no one behind.**
18. The aspirations of the **Four Betters** reflect the interconnected economic, social and environmental dimensions of agrifood systems and rural development, and their centrality to the 2030 Agenda.

19. **20 Programme Priority Areas in the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31** will shape FAO's actions in supporting countries and act as pathways towards achieving the SDGs, in alignment with national priorities.
20. Action at country level is at the core of the 2030 Agenda.
21. In the Near East and North Africa region, the pre-pandemic food security situation was already critical.
22. Hunger was on the rise; inequalities were increasing, particularly between rural and urban populations with women and youth being left behind.
23. The degradation of natural resources and water scarcity were worsening.
24. According to the *2020 Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition*, hunger in the NENA region had continued to rise since 2014.
25. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the number of undernourished people in the region by 4.3 million, compared with 2019.
26. These trends in hunger and food insecurity suggest that it will be very difficult for the region to achieve the SDG 2 target of Zero Hunger by 2030 without extraordinary efforts.
27. The **four priorities**, identified through an extensive and inclusive consultation process, are driving FAO's programme of work in the region,
28. Focusing on transforming the region's agrifood systems, supporting the region in recovering from the effects of the pandemic, addressing the impacts of the climate crisis and contributing to achieving the SDGs.
29. The four priorities focus on innovations and best practices for:
 - **One:** Reducing the economic divide between urban and rural livelihoods through better rural employment opportunities, in particular for the youth and for women;
 - **Two:** Ensuring healthy diets for all, particularly in increasingly urbanized areas;
 - **Three:** Restoring environmental balance, with focus on water scarcity, natural resources and climate action; and
 - **Four:** Building resilience against multiple shocks.
30. Following the restructuring of headquarters, the structural reforms now taking place in the Regional and the Subregional offices will ensure we are **One FAO**,
31. By fostering coherent actions and breaking down silos, both horizontally (across disciplines) and vertically (across levels).
32. The **Regional Offices** have a strategic role to play to ensure that FAO's core competencies are systematically harnessed through regional, cross-regional, and cross-continental cooperation.
33. FAO's flagship initiatives support the efficient, effective and coherent implementation of the Strategic Framework across all regions.
34. The **Hand-in-Hand Initiative** facilitates agrifood systems transformation and sustainable rural development by targeting countries and regions that have the highest rates of poverty and hunger, differentiating territories and strategies, and focusing on analysis and partnerships.
35. Approaches are tailored to country specific needs.
36. So far, 3 countries in the region are participating in the Initiative, and we look forward to more Members participating.

37. FAO's Global Action on **One Country One Priority Product**, aims to develop green and sustainable value chains for special agricultural products,
38. With important opportunities for its implementation in the region.
39. By focusing on products with unique qualities and special characteristics associated with geographic locations and cultural heritages,
40. Which can significantly contribute to food security and healthy diets, supporting farmers' livelihoods and economic competitiveness, while protecting the environment and biodiversity.
41. The **1000 Digital Villages Initiative** aims to convert villages across the world into digital hubs to support the acceleration of rural transformation.
42. The initiative facilitates smallholder producers' access to knowledge and markets, while reducing the digital gap, including the gender and rural divide.
43. The initiative has been rolled out in 7 countries of the region through the **Regional Innovation Flagship**.
44. A **regional strategy on digital innovation** will further accelerate the trend towards strengthening digital infrastructure,
45. By creating an enabling environment and supporting the development of national e-agriculture strategies and digital tools and services.
46. We have also invested in the development of **Regional Technical Platforms** that bring together best knowledge, taking advantage of regional expertise.
47. The FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa is currently developing a **Regional Technical Platform on Water Scarcity**, which will become a knowledge hub on water,
48. Where countries worldwide will be able to benefit from the vast experience acquired in this region on how to address the challenge of water scarcity.

Dear Colleagues,

49. Two key thematic strategies are being developed to support the implementation of the Strategic Framework.
50. The **Strategy on Science and Innovation** will put science, technologies and innovation at the center of our action,
51. Helping to accelerate progress and ensuring that our work is firmly grounded on scientific evidence.
52. An updated **Strategy on Climate Change** is also being developed.
53. For effective adaptation and mitigation of the impacts of the climate crisis, we need to accelerate and mainstream climate action across all our programmes.
54. Regional consultations with a wide range of stakeholders and experts have taken place to gather regional perspectives for the preparation of these strategies.
55. There is an urgent need to address the crises affecting a number of countries in the region.
56. The **Humanitarian-Peace-Development nexus** provides a sound framework to promote integrated approaches to effectively improve resilience and address food insecurity in countries such as Afghanistan, the Sudan, Syria and Yemen,
57. Where humanitarian crises, the impacts of the pandemic and extreme climate events are heavily affecting rural populations.
58. The threat of **transboundary pests and diseases** continues to be a major challenge in the region.
59. The **One Health** programme aims to address and mitigate such threats,

60. And the contribution and efforts by affected countries continues to be critical to curb the spread of **Fall Armyworm** and **Red Palm Weevil**.
61. Through effective collaboration by all concerned parties, the **Desert Locust** situation has much improved, although the situation continues to be monitored through the **FAO global Desert Locust Information Service**.
62. Achieving our common goals and vision of a region free from hunger, malnutrition and poverty will depend on our ability to build effective partnerships, to implement collective actions and programmes,
63. And to engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including civil society organizations and the private sector.
64. At regional level, FAO co-leads together with **UNEP**, the Issue-based Coalition on food security, climate and the environment.
65. At country level, our collaboration with other UN agencies in pursuing sustainable development is strengthened through the **UN Sustainable Development Framework**.
66. In **Iraq**, for example, **FAO, WFP and IFAD** collaborated with the **World Bank** in March 2020 to monitor and report on the impact of COVID-19 on Iraq's agrifood sector.
67. FAO is hosting the recently established **Coordination Hub** for the follow up of the **UN Food Systems Summit**,
68. Which will assist countries through technical and policy support in further developing and implementing national pathways towards agrifood systems transformation.
69. FAO is committed to working together with all countries and partners in the region to reach our collective, regional and global objectives.
70. I wish you a successful Ministerial Session, which will build up the political commitment and ownership for our common mandates.
71. Together, to make a peaceful and prosperous, healthy and happy region!
72. Thank you! *Shukran!*